

Commentary  
by Mike Hendricks

Kansas City Star

KLZR goes from grand to bland

We interrupt this column for an important announcement:  
My favorite radio station is dead!

Driving across town the other day, I tuned in 105.9 FM, the alternative rock station from Lawrence, and nearly veered into a beer truck.

Katrina and the Waves! On the Lazer?

One of the most insipid bands from the mid-1980s was singing "I'm Walking On Sunshine" - woh-oh! - on a station that for six years would have sooner run the emergency broadcast signal than play such drivel.

A station whose committment to "new and interesting sounds" earned it a spot last April on ROLLING STONE magazine's list of "Ten Stations that Don't Suck" in America today.

Yet as if to disprove that point, KLZR was now shoving aside Cake, Nirvana and Ben Folds Five to make room for the likes of Katrina, Backstreet Boyhs and pop idol du jour Britney Spears.

Britney Spears!

What had happened to MY radio station, one of the few that played something other than a mishmash of "hits from the 70s, 80s and '90s?"

The same thing that could happen to your favorite station, if it hasn't already.

On the advice of a consultant, KLZR was reprogrammed to serve a different market niche. One year after the family-owned station was purchased by a growing media group, the locally developed format was scrapped.

"The research showed that we were missing a large portion of the market," said Hank Booth, who remained general manager after selling to Zimmer Broadcasting of Cape Girardeau, Mo.

This has gone on since Marconi. One day your favorite station plays country, the next day's hip-hop round the clock. But changes are coming at a faster frequency as the radio industry consolidates as never before.

Blame the Telecommunications Act of 1996. Deregulation bills supposedly improve competition for the public good, and this one may, too. But here's one side effect our fearless

leaders neglected to mention:

Chances are some big company will buy your favorite radio station and ruin it for you.

What the Telecom Act did for the radio industry was remove ownership limitations. Previously, no single company could own more than 20 AM and 20 FM stations nationwide. Today, the sky's the limit.

The resulting buying frenzy has seen thousands of stations change hands. Some groups now control hundreds of signals. Today, one company owns 11 Kansas City area stations. Only thanks to one of Congress' few remaining nods to market diversity, Entercom radio group must sell three of those signals to meet the new single-market limit of eight.

Analysts say all of this consolidation fosters sameness, prompting ROLLING STONE to compile that list on which KLZR was included.

I'll leave it to the entertainment writers to explain how changes at MY radio station will affect the local music scene. And let me acknowledge that the station's new owners have every right to make their format as bland as dry toast. Predictability spells success in rock radio today, every bit as much as it does on TV and on the menu boards at junk food restaurants.

Still, it's a shame when the station that played a certain type of music, your music, abandons you.

Fool that you were, you thought listener loyalty meant something. Turns out, it doesn't these days, and maybe it never did.